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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet presents information about the accreditation of institutions of higher education in the United States. Accreditation is a process of external quality review used to scrutinize colleges, universities, and educational programs for quality assurance and improvement. In the United States, in 2002, 6,421 institutions were accredited, and 18,713 programs were accredited. If the institutions, 4,196 (65.3%) were degree-granting, and 3,617 (56.3%) were nonprofit institutions. Accreditation is through regional accreditors, operating in six clusters of states, national accreditors that review entire institutions, and specialized accreditors for programs and some single-purpose institutions. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) review the quality and effectiveness of accrediting organizations. This document also contains the recognition standards spelled out by USDE and CHEA. (SLD)

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Fact Sheet #1: Profile of Accreditation

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

August 2003

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FACT SHEET #1

Profile of Accreditation

August 2003

"ACCREDITATION" IS A PROCESS OF EXTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW USED BY higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. In the U.S., accreditation is carried out by private, nonprofit organizations designed for this specific purpose.

Institutions and educational programs seek accredited status as a means of demonstrating their academic quality to students and the public and to become eligible for federal funds.

NUMBERS OF ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMS

- 6,421 institutions are accredited[1]
- 18,713 programs are accredited[2]

These institutions and programs are accredited by organizations recognized either by the United States Department of Education (USDE) or by organizations recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or undergoing a CHEA recognition review.[3] USDE or CHEA "recognition" is a review of the quality and effectiveness of accrediting organizations based on the respective standards of USDE or CHEA.

Of the 6,421 institutions:

- 4,196 (65.3%) are degree-granting (associate degree and above)
- 2,225 (34.6%) are non-degree-granting
- 3,617 (56.3%) are nonprofit
- 2,804 (43.6%) are for-profit

6,134 accredited institutions are in the federal Title IV (Student Assistance) Program. 3,740 of these institutions are nonprofit and 1,893 are for-profit. 501 foreign institutions are Title IV-eligible.[4] If an institution participates in Title IV, students have the opportunity to apply for federal grants and loans to finance their education.

TYPES AND NUMBERS OF RECOGNIZED ACCREDITORS

Types of Accreditors

- *Regional*: Regional accreditors operate in six specific clusters of states (regions) in the U.S. and review entire institutions, 97.4% or more of which are both degree-granting and nonprofit. There are 2,963 regionally accredited institutions.

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[1] CHEA Internal Review, Summer 2002
[2] CHEA *Almanac of External Quality Review 2003*
[3] CHEA was founded in 1996 and initiated recognition reviews in 1999. Not all accrediting organizations that participate in CHEA have completed the recognition process.
[4] USDE, Office of Student Financial Aid, 2002

- *National*: National accreditors operate throughout the country and review entire institutions, 35.9% of which are degree-granting and 64.0% of which are non-degree-granting; 20.9% are non-profit and 79.0% are for-profit. There are 3,458 nationally accredited institutions. Many are single-purpose institutions focusing on, e.g., education in business and information technology. Some are faith-based.

- *Specialized*: Specialized accreditors operate throughout the country and review programs and some single-purpose institutions. There are 18,713 of these accredited programs and single-purpose operations.

In December 2002:

- 56 accreditors were recognized by USDE.

- 58 accreditors were recognized by CHEA or undergoing a CHEA recognition review.

- 36 of these accreditors were both USDE- and CHEA-recognized or undergoing a CHEA review.[5]

PURPOSES OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation serves the following purposes:

- *Assuring Quality*. Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities and programs assure academic quality to students and the public.

- *Access to Federal Funds*. Accreditation of institutions and programs is required in order for students to gain access to federal funds such as student grants and loans and other federal support.

- *Easing Transfer*. Accreditation of institutions and programs is important to students for smooth transfer of courses and programs among colleges and universities.

- *Engendering Employer Confidence* Accredited status of an institution or program is important to employers when evaluating credentials of job applicants and providing financial support to current employees seeking additional education.

RECOGNITION PURPOSES AND STANDARDS[6]

USDE and CHEA each review the quality and effectiveness of accrediting organizations:

- USDE's primary purpose is to assure that federal student aid funds are purchasing quality courses and programs. USDE's recognition is based on ten standards that include attention to, e.g., recruitment and admission practices, fiscal and administrative capacity and facilities.

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[5] CHEA Internal Review, December 2002

[6] Please visit the USDE Website at www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/ for additional information about the USDE recognition standards and a list of recognized accreditors. Please visit the CHEA Website at www.chea.org for additional information about the CHEA recognition standards and a list of CHEA accreditors.

- CHEA's primary purpose is to assure and strengthen academic quality and ongoing quality improvement in courses, programs and degrees. CHEA's recognition is based on five standards that include, e.g., advancing academic quality and encouraging needed improvement.

USDE RECOGNITION STANDARDS

Required Standards and their Application (as of July 1, 2000)[7]

602.16 Accreditation and preaccreditation standards.

(a) The agency must demonstrate that it has standards for accreditation, and preaccreditation, if offered, that are sufficiently rigorous to ensure that the agency is a reliable authority regarding the quality of the education or training provided by the institutions or programs it accredits. The agency meets this requirement if–

(1) The agency's accreditation standards effectively address the quality of the institution or program in the following areas:

(i) Success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution's mission, including as appropriate, consideration of course completion, State licensing examination, and job placement rates.

(ii) Curricula.

(iii) Faculty.

(iv) Facilities, equipment, and supplies.

(v) Fiscal and administrative capacity as appropriate to the specified scale of operations.

(vi) Student support services.

(vii) Recruiting and admissions practices, academic calendars, catalogs, publications, grading, and advertising.

(viii) Measures of program length and the objectives of the degrees or credentials offered.

(ix) Record of student complaints received by, or available to, the agency.

(x) Record of compliance with the institution's program responsibilities under Title IV of the Act, based on the most recent student loan default rate data provided by the Secretary, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews, and any other information that the Secretary may provide to the agency.

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[7] Source: *Current List of Nationally Recognized Agencies and State Agencies Recognized for the Approval of Public Postsecondary Vocational Education and Nurse Education and the Criteria for Recognition by the U.S. Secretary of Education*. United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. June 2000.

CHEA RECOGNITION STANDARDS

This language illustrates the recognition standards and is not the full or official CHEA policy statement. Please consult the CHEA *Recognition Policy and Procedures* at www.chea.org for the formal policy language that is used in CHEA recognition reviews. The CHEA recognition policy was adopted by the board of directors in September 1998.

- *Advance academic quality.* Accreditors are required to have a clear definition of quality and clear expectations that the institutions or programs they accredit have processes to determine whether quality standards are being met.

- *Demonstrate accountability.* Accreditors are required to have standards that call for institutions and programs to provide consistent, reliable information about academic quality and student achievement to foster continuing public confidence and investment.

- *Encourage purposeful change and needed improvement.* Accreditors are required to encourage planning for purposeful change and scrutiny for needed improvement through ongoing self-examination in institutions and programs.

- *Employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision-making.* Accreditors are required to maintain appropriate and fair organizational policies and procedures that include effective checks and balances.

- *Continually reassess accreditation practices.* Accreditors are required to undertake self-scrutiny of their accrediting activities.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity in the United States. CHEA represents degree-granting colleges and universities as well as institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

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